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Course 1

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Anwar Sadat's Statecraft and the 1973 Arab-Israeli War

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Now is an important time for the American people to sharpen their knowledge of national security strategy in order to make rational choices. Should the US commit armed forces to support humanitarian assistance operations in Bosnia - Hercegovina? Should US military forces be involved in counter-drug operations? Which presidential candidate has articulated the better foreign policy? A knowledge of national security strategy helps us to answer these important questions.

So how do we recognize a good strategy or an exceptional statesman? History provides many examples of strategies and statesmen that have triumphed and failed. Unfortunately the strategies and tools that worked for one statesman did not work for another. History does not furnish a magic formula for successful statecraft; national security strategy is situational in nature and an art in practice. But history does provide excellent examples that illuminate certain characteristics common to successful strategies.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the characteristics of a successful national security strategy and to suggest implications for national security strategy in general and American security strategy in particular. The statecraft of Anwar Sadat surrounding the 1973 Arab-Israeli War is an excellent case for study. Who won the 1973 war? American popular opinion would most certainly select Israel. On the other

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hand, Arab popular opinion would declare Egypt as the principle victor. An understanding of Sadat's strategy will provide insights into successful statecraft and the answer to who won the 1973 war.

A rational understanding of the complete situation is the foundation for a successful national security strategy. This includes determining the essence of the problem by examining the national interests of all players and the threats to those interests, evaluating constraints and opportunities in both the international and domestic contexts, and projecting a vision of the future if current trends continue. Sadat's exceptional skill in assessing the Middle East situation provided a solid footing for his strategy.

Sadat realized that the post-1967 stalemate between the Arabs and Israel could continue indefinitely, blocking any move toward a peaceful settlement. He believed that Israel would not return all of the territory lost in the 1967 war. This was a national survival issue for Israel, and the captured land significantly reduced the threat to Israel's strategic security. The occupied territories were also a national survival issue for Arab states. He judged that Arab military might could not force a solution on Israel, and he knew a negotiated settlement was out of the question -as long as Arab honor remained stained from the humiliating 1967 defeat. Sadat's analysis captured the essence and the dilemma of the conflict.

Sadat's assessment of the international environment was partially accurate. He appraised the US - Soviet detente initiated in 1972 as a relaxation of superpower tension, and reasoned that the USSR would not provide decisive support to Egypt.¹ He also believed that the US would not

¹ Anwar El-Sadat, In Search Of Identity: An Autobiography (Harper and Row, Inc., 1977), p. 229.

intervene due to its experience in Vietnam and the ongoing Watergate scandal.² Although the Middle East was an important part of each superpower's national interest, they would not risk confrontation. Sadat realized that Egypt was the only Arab state with the power to break the Middle East stalemate. A limited military objective was achievable, if Israel was simultaneously attacked in the east.³ He recognized the opportunity of using oil as a powerful political instrument, and the likelihood of using his friendships throughout the Arab world to make oil a weapon against Israel and her supporters. He viewed non-aligned and third-world countries as an opportunity to increase international support for the Arab cause.

Sadat also expertly appraised his domestic situation. He knew that Egypt needed modern equipment to replace her 1967 losses, and judged that the economy could not sustain a prolonged military buildup far into 1974.⁴ He realized that his speeches were a double-edged sword: he had galvanized popular support, but now his people and the Arab community expected action. Events would not permit him to accept a stalemate.

Sadat looked into the future and determined that he had a window of opportunity to act. He saw that detente would eventually constrain Arab military options. He knew that the increasing construction of Israeli settlements in occupied lands would stiffen his opponent's determination

² Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr., A Concise History of the Middle East, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p. 311.

³ Sadat, Op. cit., p. 224.

⁴ Ibid., p. 245.

not to make concessions. He merged his domestic and international assessments and determined that Egypt must attack as soon as possible.

Sadat's analysis of the situation was thorough and mostly accurate. Return of the occupied territory was central to Egypt's national interest and therefore a national security policy objective. But neither side would negotiate. Sadat concluded that if Egypt crossed the Suez and Syria attacked the Golan (and held on to any recaptured territory), then the Arabs could "shatter the Israeli 'theory of security'," and eliminate "the humiliationendured since the 1967 defeat."⁵ This would create the flexibility for both parties to negotiate a settlement. Military force was the only instrument of policy that could achieve those ends. Sadat's logic demonstrated a keen understanding of the physical and moral forces at work in the conflict.

Sadat fashioned a comprehensive strategy. He planned to use all available instruments of foreign policy to create the conditions for success. He was keenly aware of economic considerations and intended to use Arab oil as a weapon by cutting off supplies to Israel and her supporters. He provided for the mobilization of Egypt's domestic economy in order to support a sustained war effort. Sadat intended to use public and covert diplomacy "before the battle, during the battle, and after the battle."⁶ He planned to use diplomacy to: cultivate an international pro-Arab public opinion (especially in non-aligned and third world countries), build Arab support and consensus, increase USSR military hardware deliveries,

⁵ Ibid., p. 244.

⁶ Speech by Anwar El-Sadat before the ASU central Committee and the People's Assembly, Cairo, July 23, 1973, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, pp.68 and 618.

mobilize the people of Egypt, further his deception plan, end the fighting, and bring both Israel and Egypt to the negotiating table.

Sadat's strategy centered on the use of military force and depended heavily on deception. A surprise Arab attack across the Suez would defeat local defenders, destroy a large portion of the Israeli Airforce, and regain an extensive piece of occupied territory. A surprise attack in the Golan would meet with success and quickly threaten Israeli national survival. Neither attack could directly support the other. The surprise nature of the attack would burst the strategic bubble of Israeli security and Arab feebleness. Surprise was essential and therefore required a masterful deception plan.

The nature of Sadat's strategy was the heart of his deception scheme. The plan relied on the international perception of Arab weakness and Israeli strength. Sadat believed that observers would misinterpret Arab moves; they simply would not believe the Arabs would conduct a limited objective attack for psychological and political reasons.

Sadat planned to first lull Israel into a false sense of security, and then strike. He would provoke Israel into mobilizing her reserves several times before the October war. He would use public media campaigns, civil defense alerts, and military exercises to incite his opponent. He knew that Israel could not sustain the associated social and economic costs of repeated mobilizations. The Israelis would grow complacent. Sadat also would disguise the attack by leaking information in diplomatic channels about a future visit to UN headquarters during the first week in October. He planned to create the conditions for surprise at the tactical and strategic levels.

Sadat's strategy was extraordinarily successful. Diplomacy before the war cemented Arab unity, quelled much of the unrest in Egypt, and secured "the support of more than a hundred countries."⁷ Continued diplomacy and the cutback in oil once the war started virtually isolated Israel in the international community.

Israel failed to mobilize its reserves in October and was surprised by the Egyptian-Syrian attack. The Israeli Minister of Defense, Moshe Dyan, reportedly said that Sadat "made me do it twice, at a cost of ten million dollars each time. So, when it was the third time round I thought he wasn't serious, but he tricked me!"⁸ Henry Kissinger described the attack as "a classic of strategic and tactical surprise.... (resulting) from the misinterpretation of facts available for all to see."⁹ Surprise was nearly complete and for several days wild stories of success circulated in the Arab press.

The Egyptian military attack achieved and retained its limited objectives, while avoiding massive destruction. At first the Syrian attack also achieved its objective, but was driven back and decimated. Israel concentrated her forces in the north-east, and then shifted forces against the Egyptians in the west. US equipment began to pour into Israel in response to a desperate plea. Satellite intelligence was also provided to the Israeli general staff. Israeli armored forces eventually penetrated between two Egyptian armies on the east bank, crossed the Suez, encircled the Arabs,

⁷ Sadat, *Op. cit.*, p. 240.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁹ Henry Kissinger, "Why We Were Surprised," Years of Upheaval (Little and Brown, Inc., 1982), p. 459.

and threatened a decisive defeat. Sadat's continued diplomacy actively sought a UN cease-fire resolution and superpower intervention. The USSR threatened to intervene and the superpowers moved dangerously close to a confrontation. A Security Council resolution was soon reached and a shaky cease-fire implemented. Despite the encirclement of an entire Egyptian army, Sadat achieved his immediate goal of destroying the "belief in Israel's invincibility and Arab impotence,"¹⁰ The path for negotiation was now open.

Although Sadat's strategy was eminently successful, he made several errors. His diplomacy failed to obtain the right equipment from the Soviets. The oil weapon failed to deter the US from resupplying Israel. He underestimated the ability of the Israelis to regenerate their force (even without US help), and he overestimated the combat staying power of Egypt's armed forces. Perhaps Sadat's biggest miscalculation was his underestimation of US involvement, particularly the quality and quantity of weapons and intelligence provided.

Sadat's statecraft surrounding the 1973 Arab-Israeli War contains several lessons for general national security strategy. A thorough and accurate assessment of the situation, especially in determining the essence of a conflict, is critical for good strategy. Analysis must consider the psychological dimension of actor motivation when evaluating an adversary's potential actions. Strategists must understand the power and constraints associated with each policy instrument if resources are to match goals. Economic instruments of power are long-run by nature, and tend to have little effect on a state whose national survival is at stake. Diplomacy is an exceptionally flexible tool; it can achieve many different ends.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 459.

Sadat's statecraft also holds a lesson for US national security strategy. Democracies seem particularly vulnerable to deception and a false sense of security. Democratic values and economic considerations tend to distort our view of the world and lead to bad assumptions.

Anwar Sadat's strategy surrounding the 1973 Arab Israeli War provides insights into successful statecraft. His concept of victory allowed both sides to win. Following endless diplomacy, Sadat and Begin met at the Camp David Summit in September 1978. Egypt and Israel formally ended their state of war on 26 March 1979.